

fictional heroine, is depicted in the full horrors of that period: deprivation, hopelessness, and isolation. I lived through the period, but I remember the acceptance of those conditions and that the joy of life was never extinguished. It was a time of powerful drama, especially for young people. That's what I'm after in my fiction. So there's the story of my encounter with children's literature!

**Cecil Freeman Beeler** was born in 1915, eldest of a family of eight, and raised in rural Saskatchewan. He began writing as an avocation at fifteen, but his career was in technology. Retiring in 1980, he increased his writing side, mostly for children and young adults. He is best-known for his stories about his feisty prairie heroine, Corinne Kragh (Red Deer College Press). The Girl in the Well earned a nomination for the Mr. Christie Book Award and No Room in the Well received a Canadian Children's Book Centre Our Choice Award. A third book in the series, Boys in the Well, has just been published. Cecil Freeman Beeler lives in Calgary.

## IT ISN'T JUST A STORY

*William Bell*

**Résumé:** L'auteur discute des relations entre le récit historique et différents genres narratifs comme le roman, la biographie et l'autobiographie; il parle ensuite de la genèse de son roman *Forbidden City*, qui raconte l'expérience d'un jeune Canadien témoin du massacre de la Place T'ien an Men, en juin 1989.

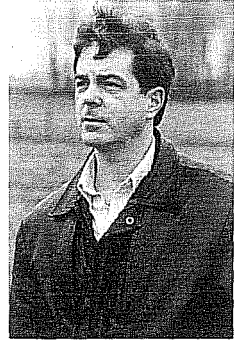


Photo credit: Peter McEwen

William Bell

In the third of six radio lectures that make up *The Educated Imagination*, Northrop Frye suggests that the historian *tells us* "what happened" whereas literature *presents* "what happens." But, while good history entails impersonal examination of objectively acquired data, the mantle of the scientist does not rest comfortably on the historian's shoulders, for as soon as she moves from the hard data (a treaty, the household records of a medieval king) toward exposition that will make clear to her reader the significance of this information, she must analyze, draw conclusions, suggest alternatives, attribute motive and assess the impact of events on persons and populations. She employs not just analysis and synthesis but her imagination; she moves toward the realm of the literary writer. In developing argument, she employs rhetoric (imagining the result of one's statements on the reader); in bringing to life historical personages, she becomes, at least in part, a novelist. Personal histories (biography and autobiography), often assumed to be compendia of fact and nothing else, make no less use of the imagination, for even basic decisions like what to include in and what to leave

out of one's own or another's life story are often based on the relative dramatic effect on the reader. Here, too, rhetoric has its place. Biographers are notoriously and understandably sympathetic towards their subjects. Of the influence of rhetoric on autobiography little needs to be said.

To me, then, history, biography, autobiography and fiction are not discrete disciplines, not qualitatively different; and historical fiction is neither an oxymoron nor a hybrid grafting two disparate disciplines. These four modes of writing form a spectrum, all four employing and requiring the creative imagination to a greater or lesser degree.

I have written two novels based on contemporary events. In *Speak to the Earth* I used as a backdrop the "Clayoquot Summer" on Vancouver Island in 1993 for a story of a fifteen-year-old boy caught up, much against his will, in the clear-cut logging dispute that divided his community and his family. I kept close to real events without being bound by them; I included real organizations and real towns, but renamed them. I did not feel bound by a particular set of facts.

*Forbidden City*, a novel of the Beijing Massacre in Tian An Men Square in June, 1989, was inspired by rage, then sadness, then a deep desire to get the story out in an accurate and lasting manner. I have lived and taught in China for two years, first in Harbin (1982-3), then in Beijing (1985-6). I, like my main character Alex, with map, compass and guide book, explored the city by bicycle over the course of a year. I have walked and biked many times across the vast expanse of Tian An Men Square, where the People's Liberation Army opened fire on the students and citizens; I am familiar with the streets where tanks overran barricades and ground bicycles and enraged protesters beneath their tracks. When the accounts of the massacre began to come in (some even as the assault on the square was going on), I was able picture what was happening with vivid clarity.

Before the month of June had expired, I had decided to write a novel about the massacre. Why a novel? Because relatively few people read history and because, as Koestler (in *Darkness at Noon*) and Malraux (in *La Condition Humaine*) have shown, the novel has greater power to help the reader *feel* she was there and viscerally understand the events. Why write at all? I did not know at the time whether Liu Si (June 4) would remain long in the public mind once it fell from the pages of newspapers whose attention would inevitably move elsewhere, and I wanted to capture the events in a more lasting form.

Since the "historical record" was not yet history, my research relied on fresh reports. Each day, I pored over newspapers, hunting for and recording any new scrap of information. I watched any TV coverage I could find, note-pad in hand. I ransacked magazines and listened to radio, especially the CBC's *As It Happens*. Since none of these media is an unimpeachable source of information, careful cross-checking of all data was a necessity. No detail was too tiny.

The challenges I faced when writing *Forbidden City* were, I expect, typical of the historical novel. The bedrock of any story is composed of setting, plot and character, and the historical novelist must decide to what extent he will "play with"

these basic elements. Keeping in mind that the foremost goal of every novel must be to tell a good story, I had to decide how tightly I would be bound by my research.

Setting (place, atmosphere, time, context) was a given. It was extremely important to me that no one should be able to say that what happens in the book is inaccurate or exaggerated, so I decided early on that the actual events would drive the narrative. With one minor exception — the shooting began at Muxidi, down the road from Tian An Men, not in the square as reported in the novel — the events culminating in the assault on the square and the attack itself are given exactly as and when they occurred, up to the point where Alex, wounded in the leg by a stray AK-47 bullet, escapes from the melee, aided by several university students.

From there on, I allowed myself a little more flexibility. In the days following the massacre, what I present are things that happened (the PLA holding citizens at gun-point while checking their papers, the deployment of tanks and troops), but now they are subservient to the story of Alex's odyssey as he tries, with Xinhua's help, to get to the Canadian embassy, then the airport. Invented but reflecting actual events are the shooting of the cyclist near the Foreign Affairs College and of the young men at the road block. The assassination of an elderly woman who shouted "Fascists!" to a truck-load of soldiers is true, taken from an eye-witness report from a reporter interviewed from Beijing on *As It Happens*.

It is common in the historical novel to take real persons and invent personalities for them. For many reasons, I could not do that. Barring a few students who thrust themselves forward as leaders, most of the "actors" in this drama were faceless young women and men attacked by equally faceless soldiers, both groups manipulated by faceless women and men in the Communist Party structure. I lacked the luxury of the calm and dispassionate analysis that the distance of centuries can bring. So, although real people are mentioned and seen, my characters are all invented.

A second decision about character has to do with "depth." Like comedy, historical fiction occasionally uses "flat" characters. Young Alex Jackson (Shanda), an avid reader of history and military history in particular, is the means through which I tried to portray the visceral effect of the events, so he had to be a fully-developed personality. As most of my readers would not be Chinese, I made my main character a foreigner who, through his own courage and concern for his father's safety, finds himself in the square when the PLA pile out of the trucks, form a line and start shooting. He has little knowledge of what exactly is going on in Beijing for the few months he is there, and less awareness of the significance of the events.

Thus, one of my most difficult tasks (if rewriting and that most hated act, cutting, are any measure) was the addition of enough cultural and historical background to provide a sense of authenticity and context without burdening the story with exposition. Alex, the story's point of view, is a true cultural innocent. Like most of my anticipated readers, he knows little or nothing about Chinese culture, traditions, customs or attitudes, and, to understand, he must learn. My

primary vehicle for his education is Lao Xu, the middle-aged scholar who serves as interpreter for the CBC news team of Eddie and Alex's father, Ted, and who, as part of his job, reports back to his Party bosses on the Canadians' activities. Lao Xu becomes Alex's friend, explains things to him (and thus the reader), takes him on tourist excursions, invites him to a Beijing tea-house where story-tellers recount tales from classical novels. Later, after Lao Xu is shot down in the square, Xin-hua continues Alex's guidance.

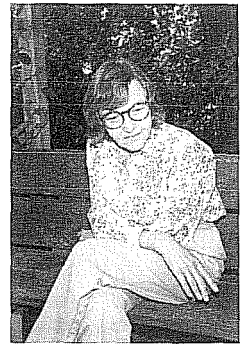
I said above that *Forbidden City* was inspired by emotion. I love to write stories, and the writing of a few of my books can best be described as fun. This one, though important and meaningful and rewarding to me, was not. During those awful days, a refrain could be heard time and time again from the students and citizens of Beijing: Tell the world what has happened. Aside from recounting an event that took place in a city and country where I had and still have close friends, I felt a deep responsibility to get the story right, and to tell it well enough that people outside China would know what really happened, for my friends and I knew that the government would lie. China's is a government which does not so much break human rights as refuse even to acknowledge them, and her official line, trade with Canada and the granting of an honorary degree to a Chinese government official by a Canadian university notwithstanding, remains that no one died in the Tian An Men Square on the night of June 4, 1989. But *Forbidden City* is published in ten countries outside Canada, and in eight languages other than English. Like Alex I have tried to tell the world, to honour the citizens and students, and the blood-stained radiance of their cause.

**William Bell** is an award-winning author of ten books for young people, among them *Forbidden City*, *Speak to the Earth*, and most recently *River, My Friend*, a picture book. He lives in Orillia, Ontario.

## **REBELLION: THE BACK OF THE TAPESTRY**

*Marianne Brandis*

**Résumé:** L'auteur parle de la genèse de son dernier ouvrage, *Rebellion: A Novel of Upper Canada*, qui présente les choix difficiles que doit assumer un jeune Torontois en 1837.



Marianne Brandis

My latest book, *Rebellion: A Novel of Upper Canada*, presents a picture of a fourteen-year-old boy's difficult personal life and his involvement in the Rebellion of 1837 in Toronto. This is the "front" of the tapestry, the side that is meant to show.